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From the US to China, By Way of Israel

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This is the fifth installment in our series on the Olympics around the world. Here Berkeley grad and assistant professor at University of Haifa Shakhar Rahav shares how Israeli media is covering China and the Olympics.

By Shakhar Rahav

I have recently returned to my native Israel after a long sojourn in the USA. One of the things I have been looking for here is the way in which China is covered and portrayed in the Israeli media, and what images of China arise in local discourse.

As elsewhere, there is much media coverage of China these days—most of it fed by economic and commercial interests on the one hand, and by interest in the Olympics and the Olympic-hype on the other.

Indeed, most interest in China is generated by commercial interests and as such reflects our globalizing world, where economic opportunity determines interest in geography. Appropriately perhaps, most media coverage that I have seen tends to be “borrowed” [I suppose in fact purchased] from other media outlets, either the large press-agencies like Associated Press and Reuters, or respectable, and for the most part pro-market, American and British newspapers such as *The Economist*, *Bloomberg*, or *The New York Times* (often from the business section).

[Why these newspapers and not others deserves an inquiry in itself—is it propelled simply by the power relations between the countries? Are we partial to British newspapers because of the British Mandate that ruled historic Palestine between the end of WW I and 1948?]

Most presentation of this kind therefore emphasizes China’s economic growth and its market potential. Occasionally, this coverage is punctuated by original pieces that mainly address questions such as, why haven’t Israeli firms established a more significant presence in China? Why are we not yet profiting ourselves from the bonanza of China’s economic growth? And so forth.

There are no Israeli China correspondents who report from the country on a regular basis. The occasional articles about the destabilizing and deleterious effect of economic growth are translated from the international press as well and do not justify holding a regular China correspondent. The economic logic of this is clear, yet absurdities may arise. The attack earlier this week on Chinese security personnel in Kashgar that claimed 16 victims was prominently featured, even supplying a huge front-page photo for the country’s elite liberal daily paper, *Ha’aretz*. The reporting was mainly a summary of foreign outlets. Yet *The New York Times* reporting on the incident, if one read it in detail, also quoted an Israeli expert on China and Xinjiang. When the expert appeared in *Ha’aretz* the following day it was only because the paper translated en bloc an entire article from *The New York Times*.

Yet the Olympics have of course prompted some independent coverage. The country’s best-selling newspaper *Yedi’ot Aharonot* devoted its entire front page to a huge photo of rehearsals of the Olympic opening ceremony. The pages are now full with talk of “the Chinese”: “The Chinese” are waiting impatiently for the games, “The Chinese” are worried about security, “The Chinese” like harmony—and so forth. Most prominent, of course, is television coverage, and the indigenous TV reporters who, as part of their media mission, are required to fill the time with incessant chatter.

Most talk centers on the sports and the competitors, and also on “our athletes.” Yet during the ceremony coverage some remarks betray a fascination with the host country and anxiety about it. “The nightclubs” have been closed report the reporters, referring to the Sanlitun centered scene (not a word about recent roundups of dissidents and gadflies). The machine-like precision of the opening ceremonies made some reporters anxious, and they spoke of the kind of state, and regime that is necessary to produce such a highly-disciplined performance (echoes of Nazi Germany and the USSR to

these reporters' minds). More contemporary concerns emerged as a former Israeli athlete who is now a TV commentator said that she hopes the exposure to the West will bring some positive advances and advance human rights. And the funniest remark, covering one of the duller moments in the ceremony, was the TV anchor who remarked on the huge amount of restaurants in the city, and then added, "they have a huge appetite." So it is, evidently—large countries produce large appetites.

And it is appetite that brings me to the most striking presentation of China that I have encountered here. A McDonald's ad campaign presents a George W. Bush look alike, who in a commercial clip is surrounded by American-speaking security personnel dressed in suits and dark glasses, who hurry the president to a McDonald's at an undisclosed location in Israel. After the president satisfies his urges by ordering a Big Mac, he offers a couple of Israeli children tickets to the Olympic Games in "Beijing." The American president consequently adorns posters in McDonald's and holds out two tempting tickets at the customer. And so, "America," the agent of globalization, the major force and cultural ideal, presents us with food and with entertainment. It is via the USA that we the customers are invited to China. The USA, and China are thus mixed, both representing perhaps the larger international community, and the "cool" of our globalized age. The images are enhanced by McDonald's clever agreements with the film "Kung Fu Panda," and with the Olympic Games it sponsors. McDonald's now opens the door to an internationalized China offering Kung Fu, noodles, and burgers.

America opens the door to China. It was perhaps an understanding of this wisdom that gave basketball player Yao Ming the symbolic role of flag bearer for the Chinese Olympic delegation. The athlete, whose stardom is derived from his success in the American NBA world, leads the symbol of national pride, and so America paves the road to China, even, perhaps, for Chinese.

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